

10. Yummies and Yo-yos – Ideas for Summer Reading Incentives

Incentives are a key part of having a successful teen reading program. Some teens need an extra push to get them reading, while others like the idea of getting a bonus for something they already like to do. Either way, the program only benefits from providing incentives for participation.

But don't despair! These incentives don't have to be costly or elaborate. There are many free, cheap or otherwise available incentives in your community or even in your library.

Teens are so varied in interests that there is truly something for everyone. But make sure that you have a variety of items for them to select from. One item generally doesn't work well for the age spread of teens and their varied interest, but if you have to use only one item make sure that you have a variety of colors and sizes. For example, if you give away t-shirts, don't buy just 50 red shirts in medium size. Have a rainbow of colors (including black) in a variety of sizes.

Another key to the success of incentives is to make as many participants as possible winners without making it a give-away. They need to feel that they "earned" something but without making it too difficult.

Giving incentives at different intervals during the length of the program keeps the momentum going for the teens. If they lapse a week or two, but return during the last portion of the program, they can still get an incentive.

Food and Drink Coupons

McDonalds, Burger King, Dairy Queen are always popular choices. Many chain restaurants already have incentive programs in place. Make sure your library is a part of their plans. But don't forget to hit the local places too. You don't want to pass up the local teen hot spot.

Recreational Activities

Try to give passes and coupons in pairs so that they can take a friend or parent. Try the parks department for swimming pool passes. The bowling alley, roller skating or skateboarding parks are fun and popular activities. Give away admission passes for local concerts or other local music events. Movie passes and free video rental coupons are always a hit. Don't forget passes to fairs or other local events, too.

Crafts, Games and Hobbies

Give away prizes that provide teens with things to do. Boxes of dominoes, decks of cards, yo-yos, frisbees, small puzzles – all of these, while small, are still popular prizes. Small craft kits are also popular. Browse the aisles of your local hobby and discount stores to find a variety of inexpensive (\$2.00 or under) incentives.

Books

Bookstores, publishers, and vendors will often provide paperbacks at great discounts allowing you to purchase many. Do you get donations of new-looking paperbacks? Save them for incentives! However you obtain books to use as incentives, make sure you have a variety of authors and genres, and allow teens to choose their own from a selection.

Gift Certificates

Gift certificates for various retail organizations, such as bookstores, music stores, video rental stores, and discount stores are good choices. There is something for everyone in any of these stores, and teens enjoy being able to pick out their own prize.

Clothing

T-shirts, hats, bookbags, or backpacks are popular. If you have articles printed with a logo it is a good idea to leave off any dates. You can get a better discount by printing in bulk and can use the items for several years. Most teens prefer a small logo on the item, so try for a pocket or a corner when imprinting the logo.

If you use donated materials with other imprints and logos, make sure that you have a variety so teens will have a choice.

Miscellaneous

Candy bars, gum, and other tasty snacks are inexpensive, but popular prizes. Buy some sugar-free options for those who want a “healthy” alternative! Your local grocer may be willing to donate candy and snacks or donate an equal quantity for the amount you buy.

CDs or other prizes from radio/TV stations (again, make sure that you have a variety of types of music. Teens don’t all like the same music).

There are lots of small, inexpensive items that teens like: keychains, friendship bracelets, hemp jewelry, small rings.

Also consider:

Gas cards

Phone cards

Magazine subscriptions

No matter what your financial situation, there are ways to provide prizes for your teens...

No Money at All:

- \$ Ask area merchants to help with the program. Many times they can give you something, but can't sponsor the entire program. Let them know that donating one or two items is okay. Offer them something in exchange, like listing their name on the promotional material. Sometimes area merchants feel like you are requesting money, and if they know that their product is what you really need, they will be able to help in small doses.
- \$ Scour your library. Do you have any promotional items, like T-shirts, pens, donated books, etc. that would work for a prize? If you are using donated books, videos, or other materials make sure that they appear to be new. Consider giving coupons for "dollars off" library fines, free photocopies or laser print copies, or free lamination service. (Lots of teens think having their posters or original art laminated is cool!)
- \$ Start early to save free promotional materials that publishers or other jobbers send to entice you to buy things. Some of these are wonderful giveaways for teens. Make it a habit to look in your community for things. Beg for posters featuring popular comic book, movie, music or television stars at bookstores, video rental outlets, and movie theatres. Would those big cardboard stand-up displays in the video store and movie theatre make a good prize, or do they have freebie stuff from their jobbers that would work for your program?
- \$ If you have a lot of time and if you start early enough you can get national retail stores and publishers to donate materials for the summer reading program. Many have quotas on the amount of money they can spend in a year in a region, so start early, be concise and be specific about what you need and when you need it. Many will come through for you, but you need to do a lot of writing and calling. So, the best advice is to start really, really early.

A Little Money:

Do all the free stuff and ...

- \$ Ask those same merchants that couldn't give you free stuff if they will give you a discounted price to buy a few prizes or if they will match your purchases with like donated items (like a "buy one, get one free" deal).
- \$ Start shopping at hobby stores, discount stores like Dollar General, video stores, etc., and purchase things at discounted prices.

- \$ Buy multiples of things. There are many places that will give you a discounted price if you buy things in bulk. For example, if you want to give away canvas bags as incentives, make them generic enough to buy enough for two or three years, so that you can get a price break on the quantity.
- \$ Get the Friends of the Library, or other library organizations to sponsor the program by donating money to it.

Money Is No Object

You will still want to try all the free and cheap stuff – nobody is that financially sound!

- \$ Consider having a grand prize. Make it something that every teen needs or wants, no matter if they are 12 or 18 – a savings bond, a personal CD player, a mall gift certificate.
- \$ Buy coupons, gift certificates, or materials from merchants.
- \$ Buy activities or crafts for teens to do. Buy yo-yos, books, pool, bowling and movie passes, etc.
- \$ Buy books for give away, but again make sure that they are varied enough to meet every age and interest level. Try Scholastic. They have sales and discount catalogs frequently.

Remember...

Offer variety – teens like to have choices. There are no “one size fits all” prizes.

Avoid coupons that offer discounts or free merchandise with a purchase – too many teens will never get to use these “prizes.”

Consider holding drawings for prizes throughout the summer. Drawing several names every couple of weeks for small prizes (frisbees, craft kits, books, movie passes) can keep the momentum going.